

Project description

The purpose of the Environmental Justice Partnership project is to educate and build consensus about a prioritized list of risks that the community wants to address, as well as assets that the Lower West Side and community residents have that can empower them to create policy and systems change. The three groups will convene and facilitate meetings with community stakeholder groups, and engage resident experts to collaboratively compile a list of local environmental hazards-including air, land, nuclear waste, housing issues, climate change, and others. The partnership will then share the information compiled with the broader community and facilitate a prioritization process. The results will be used to design interventions to improve environmental quality and public health in the neighborhood. The project has two goals:

- a) Collect data and build community capacity
- b) Share findings and build consensus on community priorities

The partnership will conduct the following activities in order to collect data and build community capacity.

1. **Core competency training:** The CHWNB will train Lower West Side resident leaders as Community Health Workers to provide “core competencies” that will allow them to effectively engage community members in line with the project objectives. This 32 hour training will include topics and competencies such as: basics of public health and social determinants of health, participatory/popular education and adult learning theory, strengths-based approaches to working with individuals, families, and communities, community-based participatory research, and asset-based community development/community planning. The CHWNB training was developed in conjunction with the CHW Network of New York City at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, and is aligned with national best practices developed by a broad consortium of CHW’s and academic institutions through the CHW National Education Collaborative www.chw-nec.org. Several expert advisors who have worked with the CHW-NEC, as well as the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University have assisted the CHWNB in their curriculum development, and continue to provide technical assistance. The CHWNB training team is comprised of senior CHW’s, a physician, and several academics with a background in public health. The basic competencies and leadership capacities established for resident leaders/CHW’s will provide a strong foundation for a “bottom-up” approach where CHW’s will be integral in building capacity for community health and environmental justice. Participants will be recruited from

the CHWNB's network on the Lower West Side, CACWNY's membership, advertised to HOCN's clients and through the three organization's networks of churches, community centers and other community institutions in the project area. When completed, residents will have increased their knowledge of public health and gained practical skills on how to best engage residents around issues such as environmental health, and will be able to help design, gather data, and evaluate/share results as it relates to community-based participatory research. The CHWNB "core competencies" training has been highly effective in building skills, knowledge and empowerment amongst diverse groups of non-traditional leaders. The training will give those involved in the project a common way of working and identity that will promote collaboration amongst the extremely diverse base of residents on the Lower West Side, and will ensure sustainability past the initial project cycle. The CHWNB provides continuing education and learning opportunities and a city-wide network of CHW's and other frontline workers which will build individual and community health capacity for this project.

2. **Community-Based Participatory Research:** Once trained, impacted residents will participate in a series of investigations about their neighborhood through five methods.

a. **Toxics Release Inventory (TRI) training.** CACWNY has designed a community-based TRI training with support from the Environmental Council of the States (available at: <http://www.cacwny.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/CAC-TRI-Guide-final.pdf>).

Participants will learn about the point source pollution being released into their neighborhood and the health impacts associated with these exposures. The training consists of 1-hour on the history, legal basis and processes of the TRI. The second half of the training will take residents into a computer lab to explore the releases and associated health impacts in their neighborhood.

b. **Count diesel trucks at key community locations.** CHW's and residents will count the number of trucks that pass by key community institutions including schools, senior centers, bus stops and more. Residents will determine which community locations they are most concerned about. Once they have a list, they will choose days and people to monitor the locations. Participants will be given cameras, counters, and a notebook to record their locations. Again, the results will be aggregated, put into GIS and eventually shared with participants through a community meeting.

c. **Document infrastructure challenges in the neighborhood causes by diesel trucks.** The partnership will work with residents/CHW's from the neighborhood to quantify the number

of cracked sidewalks, broken curbs, and other infrastructure challenges. The results will be aggregated, uploaded into GIS maps and analyzed by students at the University at Buffalo. The analysis will be shared with residents through a community meeting.

d. Gather data about indoor quality in the neighborhood. CBPR will also be used to develop and complete surveys in the neighborhood that will assess lead, mold, leaks and other indoor air quality challenges. Residents will survey 25 homes in the neighborhood. The surveys will be aggregated and mapped using GIS software.

e. Explore brownfield contamination by taking impacted residents to review files of brownfields within the two zip codes and learning about the contaminants and locations. CACWNY will teach residents how to file a Freedom of Information request for the properties they are concerned about in their neighborhood. With support from CACWNY staff, residents will learn about the characteristics of these properties to learn how contaminated the properties are by reviewing the documents and hosting a community meeting where residents can ask professionals from the University at Buffalo about the severity of the contamination and potential health impacts of the property.

Impacted residents will be at the heart of all activities undertaken by the partnership. In partnership with academics from the University at Buffalo, they will design and implement the surveys. They will participate in the TRI training, track the trucks, assess housing conditions, review government documents about contamination and collect the concerns of others through the oral history project. Project facilitators and trainers will be CHW's and those who are community residents themselves, and/or have a strong relationship of trust with residents through shared language, culture, and/or life experiences.

The activities listed above will be led by impacted residents and staff from the partner organization. This work will be supported by several public health, environmental and medical professionals who have a long history of working with communities on similar issues. These include Dr. Joseph Gardella, Larkin Professor of Chemistry at the University of Buffalo, Dr. William Scheider, professor of Public Health at the University at Buffalo and Dr. Katie Grimm, a pediatrician and professor of internal medicine at the University at Buffalo.

In order to share the findings and build consensus on priorities the partnership will:

1. Publish a community report to share the findings. The results of the community-based research will be compiled into a report that is culturally appropriate. The impacted residents will lead this process, with support from the paid staff. The exact content of the community report will be determined by the findings of the activities mentioned above. The report will

be published in all of the languages spoken in the neighborhood and there will be a version published

2. Host a community event designed by residents to share their findings and vote.

Participants will design a creative, culturally appropriate program to tell their stories and share findings from community-based participatory research and data collection efforts. This work will be facilitated by Ujima Theatre using a process named “Unheard Voices.” Unheard Voices identifies leaders in underrepresented and underserved communities and engages them in events and dialogues that create a space for them to make their own voices heard by telling their stories, and to articulate their own needs and aspirations. Using storytelling and elements of theater and performing arts, stakeholders are able to experience an understanding of their constituencies that goes beyond what a policy brief, public hearing, or legislative visit could provide. The process also helps disseminate technical information to communities with low-levels of literacy and high levels of limited English proficiency.

Ujima will work with project participants and staff to develop a performance that will share the findings of the community-based research. The performance may include spoken word, poetry, a play, song, etc. The participants will work together intensively for for 6 weeks to develop and prepare the performance.

The group will offer three performances. At each performance, the lobby will be opened early for the audience to visit more formal presentations of the data. Five tables will be set up with residents and the supporting academic experts at each table to speak and answer questions about the poster presentations. The presentations will share the data collected by the residents during the research portion of the project. Copies of the community report will be provided to all attendees.

All audience members will be given a ballot with all of the community concerns identified. After learning in the lobby and the performance, audience members will be asked to vote on the top five issues they would like the community to tackle. The results of the survey will be used to develop the final list of community priorities that the community will present to policy makers.

The show will be free of charge and the partnership will do extensive outreach on the Lower West Side of Buffalo through the informal networks of project participants, churches, local newspapers, health care providers, and more. Audience members will be predominantly people who live on the Lower West Side and are impacted by these multiple sources of

exposure. Policy makers from all levels of government will also be invited to attend through a separate, formal invitation.

Ujima Theatre is a Buffalo-based arts and education organization whose mission is to educate as well as entertain through work that is reflective of caring for and taking responsibility for the community. In 2011, the CHWNB and Ujima collaborated to design a format that has been used to give voice to those in Buffalo who are traditionally marginalized (i.e. refugees, the homeless, youth, etc.) called “Unheard Voices”. The project engaged five immigrant and refugee women to share their stories. In the course of the project, approximately 50 immigrants/refugees, five CHW leaders, 100 community residents, and 20 community stakeholders/decision makers were engaged. The “Unheard Voices” performance received coverage from the Buffalo News, and stakeholders expressed that they were able to relate to the experiences of a population they had been serving in a new way, and would work to change systems and not just provide services.

3. Publish a list of the top concerns and share with policy makers and the public through a variety of media. The results of the surveys collected at the performances will be compiled by the partnership and the top five concerns of the community will be identified. The partnership staff will produce a one page list describing the project and share the results. Residents who participate in the project will hold a press conference at the close of the project to announce the results and ask policy makers to join them in identifying and implementing solutions to the problems they have identified. Participants in the project will also meet with selected policymakers one-on-one to share the results